

**Alex La Guma**



# **In the Fog of the Season's End**

*1972*

**Chapter Seventeen**

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Pain was like a devil which had usurped his body. It was wrenching in his wrists and hands and the sockets of his shoulders as he dangled with all the weight on the handcuffs that shackled him to the staple in the wall. It was his body, battered and bruised by the pistol barrel, and in his legs, his skinned shins, which would not hold his weight. There was a taste of pain in his mouth where the blood had replaced saliva. His whole body was held together on a framework of pain and he was thirsty. His head dangled on his chest: he could see his torn shirt, his waistband – they had taken away his belt – all blurred through puffed wyes, so he knew vaguely that he was alive. He tried to stand up straight, but his legs were pierced by nails, and he sagged again on to the manacles. He was only dimly aware of the room, the grey walls, the stone floor, a cigarette butt flung aside and crushed like an insect, dead; but the room seemed to move, the walls bulged and undulated, the floor stirred as if on rollers. He was thirsty.

He licked his dry, swollen lips with a harsh tongue and said aloud, painfully: 'Think, think of something else, think of anything.'

He was a child and they all ran along the railway tracks through the dust, waving their hands as the windows blinked past, faces stared down at him for an instant and then were gone. Then it was autumn. The grass was still green, and at that time the evenings were best. There was already a chill in the air, a touch of cool rain, especially in the valleys. They were sitting around the fires in front of the homesteads. He could see the smoke, as if drawn by a fairy hand, slowly drifting down the valley. The bird songs died out first and then the voices of the children. He would sleep peacefully because now there was hardly any work to do in the fields...

The door crashed open and the two detectives came down the steps. Elias looked up heavily and saw them as through a defective windowpane: their faces swelled and contracted, elongated and blurred. They did not say anything and the one with the glossy hair unlocked the manacles which held him to the staples. They did not

bother to hold him up and he felt his legs give with pain as the weight of his body came down on the floor. He fell on his face and tried to raise himself on his hands which were held in the second pair of handcuffs. After a struggle he was able to sit up.

Then the sportsman said, 'Well, get up, *jong*.'

'My legs, they hurt,' Elias told him, speaking with the dry, thick mouth. He could still smell the urine in his clothes.

'We'll give you hurt,' the sportsman said.

They each took him under the arms and he was paddled up to the door, out of the room, stumbling, trying to use his legs, gasping with the pain in them, stumbling and flopping like a doll all the way to another room. It was a little bigger than a broom cupboard and there was a table and two chairs in it. They thrust him into one of the chairs and the glossy-haired one sat down in the other. The sportsman lit a cigarette while the other opened a pad that was on the table.

'Well, do you want to tell everything now?' the young one asked, tapping the pad with a ball-point pen, staring at Elias with angry eyes.

Elias said huskily, 'Can I have some water? I am thirsty.'

The sportsman said, 'Shit. Do you think this is a hotel? Talk, and then you might get some water.'

The young man held his pen ready, as if he was impatient to set down what Elias was about to say. 'So you are going to tell us all then?'

Elias looked at them, seeing them hazily, far away, and saw that they were like rags from which all the water of humanity had been squeezed. He said with his thick tongue. 'You see, it is impossible. I cannot tell you anything.'

The young one stared at Elias with eyes that were now flat and expressionless as a reptile's. He put his pen away in the breast pocket of his jacket, still staring at Elias, then buttoned his jacket and stood up. He looked at the sportsman then, talking with his flat eyes.

The sportsman dragged Elias out of the chair and he fell on the floor again. Once more they seized him by his armpits and hauled him out of the tiny room. They took him down the corridor into another room which was bigger and had several chairs,

tables, some unusual equipment. They dropped him into a chair and the young one unlocked the wrist and then dragged Elias's arms behind the chair and shackled his hands there.

The sportsman said, 'You better talk, kaffir.'

Even with the pain, Elias felt the insult more than the fear, so he said, 'It is no use, it is no use.'

The glossy-haired one said, his voice shrill with menace, 'Hear us, we do not care, if you don't tell us, we will kill you.'

The sportsman hit Elias in the face then beat him up methodically, working on him at close quarters and a vast blue-blackness seemed to be coming towards him through the pain, an almost welcoming darkness. His mouth tasted of fresh blood again and his head seemed to be tearing free of his neck. He felt himself sliding away into the darkness that roared like a waterfall.

The sportsman said, as if in an echo-chamber, 'It's okay, you won't go to sleep, you baboon.'

But Elias fell over, taking the chair with him, falling heavily, so that the chair broke. The sportsman cursed and grabbed part of the chair and hit Elias across the head with it.

'Hurry up and talk, baboon,' the one with the glossy hair said, smoking a cigarette. 'You can stay here until you tell us everything or get killed, you hear?'

Elias lay on the floor and sailed away somewhere. He had the feeling that there was nothing to do but hope that pain would disappear, and he waited for it to slide back out of reach. His silence, his resolve, now seemed to take on the form of a force within him: and the amalgam of pain and brutality atomized slowly into the gathering ghosts of his many ancestors which seemed to insulate him from pain. Pain was there, yes, but somehow standing apart, a satellite revolving the planet of his being, his mind, which was full of the faraway ululations, the rattle of spears on shields, the tramp of thousands of feet.

They dragged him, bloody, to another chair. Somebody hurled water into his dough-puffy face, but it could have been acid, for his skin burned at the touch of it. Blood and water dribbled down his neck.

'We can do better,' somebody was saying.

Think of something, the pain said; something in which you believe, like love. Old Tsatsu was dead on a heap of rubble by the road, a collapsed dummy, something unimportant left aside. 'He is not asleep, but has gone to his ancestors and may they receive him with more kindness than he has met in this world.' The people sang on the dreary hillside and the wind carried away their voices like dry leaves. The sick miner walked, thin and bent, staring out of dead eyes while he coughed and spat with the disease that ate him up, as a rat would eat cheese. 'He has been bewitched,' the children cried. Bewitched? Far down in the darkness, darker than any tomb, another miner was dispersed beyond recognition under infinite tons of fallen rock and gold: yellow gold, soft as putty, which could turn the hearts of men into pitiless organs of brass.

He was being manhandled. Now there was another darkness as a sack was dragged over his head. They pulled off his trousers and underpants. He was suspended grotesquely, with his arms about his drawn-up legs and a broom handle above his elbows and below his knees. The sportsman had fixed certain electrical apparatus into a wall plug. Far away the tramp of thousands of feet drummed on the crackling earth, the rattle of spears and shields came across the long, hazy distance with the cries.

He screamed inside the sack.

The glossy-haired one cranked the handle of the magneto while the sportsman ran the electrodes against bare legs, genitals.

Elias screamed. He had anticipated violence, but not this, not this. Talk, talk, talk, his mind told him while his body jerked and jiggled like a broken puppet on badly-manipulated strings. But far, far away the ghosts gathered, the feathers bobbed and swayed, the leopard tails swung, and the sun, like a yellow lantern in the resistant sky, glanced like lightning from the hammered spearblades.

His flesh burned and scorched and his limbs jerked and twitched and fell away from him, jolting and leaping in some fantastic dance which only horror linked to him. A thousand worms writhed under his skin and broke through the surface of his flesh, each one of them shrieking in the black darkness, while far away the ghosts drifted along the hazy horizon and beckoned him to come and join them.

After a time the detectives stood back and jerked the sack from his head. They saw a shabby mask, a face puffed into swollen blankness, like the face of a drowned man.

They seized him and dragged him from the room, trouserless, his shirt bloody and ripped from the previous beating, back to the basement from which they had fetched him, and dropped him on the stone steps, slamming the heavy door and locking it on him.

The edge of the stone step ground into his temple, but the feeling of it was something apart. Nothing was real, not even pain, not even the bitter cud of humiliation in his mouth. Inside his hollow mind a single word flapped around like a torn rag in a wind-swept sand-lot: talk, talk, talk.

The stone step was actually warm against his face. Foot-steps ran past him and the smell of dust on paving was in his nostrils; Blood trickled into his neck from his scalp, where the policemen's club had caught him on the morning of the strike meeting. He was leaving home and his mother, small and homely – there was ochre powder on her face – gave him the parcel of roasted potatoes and the wiry chicken they had dared to butcher the night before: these were meant for him to eat on the road to the city. The old bus waited, puttering and wheezing like a tired old man, to drive the contracted workers to the main railway station. His mother did not cry, as perhaps other mothers would have done. Instead, she touched him with a hand and said, 'Hauw! You are a man now, my son.' The womenfolk stood by the roadside, watching the bus cough away into the distance; the men watched them recede into the brown dist mingled with the blue-grey exhaust smoke. That was when he had remembered that he had not packed the book from which he had first learned to read in English. But he had done many things since then, and read many books. The brown hills, the village, Wasserman's store, sprang into view for an instant on the flickering screen of his mind and then were gone.

Now only the black crows gathered over the battlefield. *Uya kuhlasela-pi na? Where wilt thou now wage war?* The ghosts of his ancestors beckoned from afar.

The Major said, 'You know your trouble? You are stupid. You can save yourself much distress, man. Have you not had enough?'

'He's making a bladdy fool of us,' the sportsman said. He looked at Elias. 'We are at war, and your life really means nothing to us.'

The glossy-haired one said 'If you die we can always say you committed suicide. After talking.'

The Major said again, 'You are stupid, so we have to knock some bloody sense into you.'

He got up and went to the door of the room. The air was blue with cigarette smoke and the two detectives were coatless. The Major was wearing an executive suit and the starched cuffs of his shirt peeped from his coat sleeves; he looked large and oval and official. He hesitated for a moment at the door, nodded to the two detectives, and then went out.

The glossy-haired one said, 'Give it to him good this time, the -----ing baboon.'

There was the darkness of the sack again. Talk, talk, talk. But the ghosts waited for him on some far horizon. No words came, only the screaming of many crows circling the battlefield. *Wahlula amakosi! Thou hast conquered the Kings!* The far figures moved along the far horizon. *He! Uya kuhlasela-pi na? Yes, where wilt thou now wage war?* Far, far, his ancestors gathered on the misty horizon, their spears sparkling like diamonds in the exploding sun. Somebody came out of the bright haze and touched him with a hand. His mind called out 'Mother'. From afar came the rushing sound of trampling feet.

# Chapter Eighteen

There was not much time to wait. Henny April had packed some mysterious suitcases into the van and Maria had provided a shopping-bag of food for the journey. Peter and Michael sat on the settee in the front room. They were young Africans, one of them wearing a straw boater, and each had a bundle held on his lap. It was early in the morning, towards dawn, and the electric light made their faces look yellow and intent. Maria sat at the table and spoke to them heartily in the vernacular and they replied, laughing and shaking their heads, slyly avoiding her eyes. They had turned up some hours before, and the old dog in the yard had wakened the house with its barking.

Beukes had slept fitfully in the children's room amid a maze of wooden and metal bunks, clothes dangling like bats in the dark, scattered shoes. He had stayed indoors all Sunday while Henny April had worked on the van. The pain in his arm had subsided to a gentle, untroublesome ache. In the afternoon the children, scrubbed and shiny, had been sent off to the local Sunday-school. Later in the evening, Henny April had announced that the van was ready to go like a bomb. Then they had sat at the table in the front, playing draughts far into the night. He had tried to read before falling asleep, but it had been one of the children's books: *The Young Book of Pirates*. Henny must be preparing his offspring for their future careers, he had thought, amused; the children would probably inherit the 'business' from their father. Afterwards he had drifted off to sleep.

He had wakened early in the morning when the dog started barking. The children had woken up too, and he had seen their eyes, bright as those of mice, in the darkness before he had reached out to turn on the light, all of them quiet, listening calmly. Had they been taught that there was no benefit in panic at the sound of alarm? He had heard Henny going to the front door just as the knocking came. The light had gone on in the front room, voices had mumbled and then Henny had come into the room in his long, grimy underwear to tell him that the two men had arrived.

Now they were sitting on the settee talking to Maria while Beukes wondered about the third one. He had shaken hands with them, and one of them, the one called Michael, had asked: 'How is Elias?'

Beukes had said, 'I believe he is all right.' He wondered how the young man knew about him and Elias. It's all too shaky, he thought, but dismissed suspicion like an



intruder from his mind. One has to go through with it, he told himself. 'There is another man due,' he told them. 'We will wait for him.'

'We should go with the daylight, hey,' Henny April said, while they ate bowls of porridge at the table. He was wearing washed-out overalls and a cloth cap. The children remained in bed. 'Will he come?'

'Why not?' Beukes asked. 'These tow comrades turned up.' He had already told them who would meet them when they arrives at their destination and that they should use their code names all the time. 'The other man is Paul,' he had said.

The night turned grey and dawn approached warmly; overhead the darkness drifted slowly away like the smoke of a recent battle. Soon, Beukes thought, the mornings will be colder and then we'll have autumn. Hell, I wonder how we will operate in the winter? Will we operate at all, anyway? If they've taken Elias, who will get in touch with me? But Elias would not be the only one who knew of him; somewhere, there must be another. He would leave a message with Polsky, the pharmacist.

Henny April went out to potter around the van to pass the time. Maria brought a pot of coffee and they drank it from mugs. The window was grey, but the dawn did not add yet to the lamplight that splashed over the clutter in the front room: the piled boxes, the spare parts, the sideboard with the cracked mirror. They might have taken him, this Paul, Beukes thought. If they have, they might have made him talk, and then they'd know about him, Peter and Michael, Henny April, and big Maria, the children. Don't let that happen, he whispered inside himself, don't let that happen. *A-hunting we will go*. The Security people would be very active now, the lights on in the little brown offices, over the barred gateways, the Public Works crockery. He sat there, in his baggy jacket, amid the clutter in Henny April's room, and thought of Flotman's youngsters; Abdullah, the dressmaker's husband; Tommy; Isaac. And Frances. Don't let them come on Frances, not Frances, not dear, dear Frances. The window lightened and the morning dribbled in, and Beukes shivered as the thoughts passed like pain through his mind.

Henny April came in and said: 'Listen, *ou* Buke, we got to go. I want to be gone before people notice any passengers. It's getting light. How long we still got to wait? It's a long drive too, and I got a schedule, like.' Even the business of contraband had a timetable.

'A little longer,' Beukes said, looking up from his thoughts. 'Just a few more minutes.'

The morning ushered in the first sunlight into the sky, but it was still shadowy in the yard. Then the old mongrel started barking and Henny April went out again. Beukes stood up and heard him command the dog to be quiet in the name of Jesus. Then he shouted back for Beukes and Beukes went to the door and out into the yard.

He said, 'God's truth,' for there, in the dissolving shadows, holding a paper carrier as if he had come from the market, stood Isaac.

Isaac came towards him, smiling, saying: Hullo, old Buke. I'm glad to see you're awright.'

'Ike, you bogger,' Beukes said happily. 'You old – dammit, is it you?' He was pumping Isaac's hand up and down, chuckling and enjoying the sight of the protuberant ears, the expression of mild surprise. But there was something new too, in the slightly bulging eyes.

'It's me awright,' Isaac said. Then added, 'By the way, I'm Paul now, hey.'

'Paul, yes,' Beukes said, slapping his shoulders. 'Paul. And I never knew you had volunteered.'

'They got hold of me,' Isaac smiled as they stood there in the lightening yard. 'The bloody SP almost got hold of me too. But I managed okay.'

I heard about it,' Beukes said. 'Well, dammit, it is a great thing you are doing, Ike.'

Isaac's ears turned pink, and he said seriously, 'It's just that we can't let them get away with it all the time, Buke.'

'I know, I know,' Beikes murmured, looking onto the other's eyes. 'I know.'

Henny April came up and said, 'Buke, we have got to go, pal. There's too many people around already, they might notice us.'

'Ja, I reckon so,' Beukes said. The other two men were waiting, carrying their bundles. Isaac went over and shook hands with them. The children were coming from the house now, rubbing sleep from their eyes, and trailing into the yard, staring at the men assembled there.

'Isaac,' Beukes said, you look after yourself, hey.'

'I'll do that, Buke,' Isaac nodded. 'I'll do that.' They went over towards the van. 'Listen, Buke,' he added, 'There's my ma and sister. If you could sort of let them know I'm awright?'

'I'll let them know, Ike.'

'And there's those two boys who was working with me. I got their addresses written down here. You get in touch with them, Buke, they're awright.'

'I won't forget.'

Maria had come to the door of the house, standing big, and Henny April went over to talk to her. He came back again, patting the heads of the children in the yard. It was quite light now, and the yard was revealing its shape; the piles of tyres, the spare parts, the washlines. In the street, people were starting to pass, heading for the bus-stops.

'Okay, Beukes, not to worry,' Henny April said.

Beukes smiled at him. 'I'm not worrying at all, chum.'

'Take care that arm, hey.'

They were at the van again and Beukes raised a hand, saluting the three young men who sat inside, on the padded seats which had been fitted to the floor. Henny April had loaded his suitcases.

Beukes shook hands with Peter and Michael and said, 'Remember, you stick to those names: Paul and Michael.' Then added, feeling warm, 'So long, soldiers.' He turned to Isaac and said again, 'So long, soldier, you too.'

Beukes saluted them once more and Henny April slammed the rear doors of the van and the last Beukes saw of them was Peter's straw boater and Isaac looking up to peer out through the rear window – the look of light surprise and the prominent ears. Henny April climbed behind the wheel and shut the door. He looked out while the motor ground into life, the exhaust banged, and he backed the van slowly out of the yard.

Beukes walked by the van to the street. Henny April waved to his wife and said to Beukes, 'Well, I'll see these boggers get safe where they got to go.'

The sun was brightening the east now, clearing the roofs of the suburb and the new light broke the shadows into scattered shapes. Henny April waved again, and Beukes watched the old van turn into the street and then it was wheeling away between the soiled houses, the scanty garden-lots, leaving behind a mist of blue smoke.

Beukes stood by the side of the street in the early morning and thought, they have gone to war in the name of the suffering people. What the enemy himself has created, these will become battle-grounds, and what we see now is only the tip of an iceberg of resentment against an ignoble regime, the tortured victims of hatred and humiliation. And those who persist in hatred and humiliation must prepare. Let them prepare hard and fast – they do not have long to wait.

He stood there until the van was out of sight and then turned back to where the children had gathered in the sunlit yard.

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